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The continuing resonance of the war as risk management perspective for understanding military interventions

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1990s and 2000s, a slew of books and journal articles proposed that a nexus between risk management and warfare was emerging. This article argues that risk management ideas continue to shape recent campaigns against Libya, Islamic State, Syria, and the war on terror from Niger, Yemen to Somalia. It uses existing literature on risk and warfare to examine four key aspects of contemporary interventions. First, the article evaluates the overall strategic context as security concerns shift from terrorism toward renewed great power competition. Second, it re-assesses the risk calculus for military action through the language and grammar of risk invoked by politicians. Third and fourth, it addresses the continuing reliance on air power and the managerial ethos of military operations as important features of war as risk management.

KEYWORDS Risk management; transformation of warfare; risk calculus

More than a decade has passed since “global risk management” (Petersen, 2012) scholars started postulating on the relationship between risk management and warfare (Coker, 2009; Heng, 2002; Heng, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006). These works suggested that managing security risks from terrorism to ethnic conflict preoccupied strategic planners in the post-Cold War era, rather than survival threats posed by nuclear conflict between great powers. Accordingly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) morphed from an alliance into a risk management organization (Coker, 2002; Morgan, 2015; Rasmussen, 2001; Williams, 2008). The language and vocabulary of risk began peppering Western security documents. Military interventions from Kosovo to Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 were evaluated as risk management campaigns justified by political leaders using a risk calculus averting undesirable scenarios (Heng, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006).

This article seeks to reassess and update the perspective of “war as risk management” with data from recent campaigns against Libya, Islamic State, Syria, and the continuing war on terror from Niger, Yemen to Somalia. The

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focus revolves around US military operations and its ally, Britain. Several themes drawn from pre-existing literature on risk and warfare constitute the analytical framework. The first relates to the overall strategic context and how risk management relates to other concepts such as vicarious warfare and hybrid war that have emerged. Ambiguous trans-national risks posited in the 1990s no longer dominate the strategic environment, as concerns about great power competition revive. This has generated tensions for defense establishments previously geared towards risk management campaigns. The second segment provides conceptual embedding by discussing approaches to risk analysis and the risk calculus used to justify the use of force over the past ten years. While the vocabulary of war continues to revolve around weighing action versus inaction, choices made have varied across the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations.

Thirdly, the risk-averse reliance on air power in the 1999 Kosovo campaign appears to have crystallized further with technological advancements such as lethal drones. Fourth, a minimalist logic of managing insecurity infused war and risk management (Coker, 2002; Heng, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006). The twist and turns in US strategy towards Afghanistan and Islamic State continue to provide good insights into this managerial ethos. The conclusion considers the costs and consequences of the risk management approach. These range from the impact on strategy, domestic political and social dynamics that affect future decisions on intervention, to norms and values. Taken together, the different sections are inter-linked in illustrating this article's basic argument that risk management continues to shape deliberations on war since emerging over a decade ago.

Strategic context: Paradigm change or business as usual?

The current strategic context clearly differs from the late 1990s and mid-2000s when the literature on war and risk management proliferated. Without its all-encompassing nuclear threat, for Rasmussen (2006), the post-Cold War strategic agenda emphasized "risks rather than threats" (p. 2); the dangers were now much less computable. These sentiments were best captured in the NATO Strategic Concepts as well as US National Security Strategy (NSS) and British Strategic Defense Review (SDR) reports from that period. The British 1998 SDR warned that there were "newer style of security risks that were emerging ... The challenge now is to move from stability based on fear to stability based on the active management of these risks" (HM Government, 1998, p. 9). The SDR envisioned a managerial approach to war to prevent risks from materializing. The 1999 NATO Strategic Concept identified new risks emerging, and these "included terrorism, ethnic conflict, human rights abuses, political instability, economic fragility, and the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and their means of delivery" (NATO, 1999). As

Morgan (2015) suggested, “NATO’s response was to greatly elevate the centrality of risk management within its strategic calculations” (p. 2).

The current situation is different. While the UK 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review rehashed 1990s risks such as migration, organized crime, and terrorism, it crucially highlighted “the resurgence of state-based threats” (HM Government, 2015, p. 18) particularly after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. This shift back towards inter-state competition rather than managing risks is encapsulated in the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy released in 2018. Defense Secretary James Mattis declared that: “We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists that we are engaged in today, but great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security” (as cited in Garamone, 2018). While Trump’s documents signaled a clear shift towards inter-state competition, ongoing operations from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, to Yemen continue to demand policymakers’ attention. The re-emergence of great power threats interacts with continuing risk management concerns in complex and intertwined ways.

The idea of “hybrid war” used to describe Russian intervention in Crimea stresses the blend of traditional and non-traditional tactics employed (Charap, 2015, p. 52). “Proxy war” is a means of conceptualizing the use of irregular actors in military conflict by powerful actors (Mumford, 2013; Waldman, 2018, p. 183). These concepts demonstrate how near-peer threats employed methods that confound US attempts at risk management. Russian private security contractors were killed during US air strikes in Syria against Islamic State while allowing Moscow to deny official involvement. Russian and US warplanes operating in congested Syrian airspace have established de-confliction mechanisms. During risk management campaigns such as the war on terror, US and UK militaries developed Special Operations units while drones and warplanes roamed the skies largely unchallenged. This will not be the case with great power threats, such as Russia’s S-400 air defense missiles in Syria or Chinese “carrier killer” missiles in the Pacific.

The US and UK militaries, for the past decade operating in semi-permissive environments on risk management campaigns, may be caught out by accelerating capabilities of peer-threat competitors. As US Air Force Lt General Jerry Harris, Deputy Chief of Staff for strategic plans testified in March 2018, “in 2011 we weren’t talking about peer threats, we didn’t have a strategy that said you have to focus on the high end, we were focused on winning in a (counterinsurgency) type of environment” (as cited in Pomerleau, 2018). Furthermore, the US military may conserve its resources for potential great power conflict. This may feed into “vicarious warfare” methods (Waldman, 2018, p. 181) seen in the war on terror which emphasize shielding the military from danger as far as possible and applying force through surrogates. Looming great power threats may entrench risk

management methods and mindsets where the United States perceives its interests to be less than “core,” for instance fighting the Islamic State. Waldman (2018, p. 187) contends that concerns about risk constitute a “driver” behind vicarious warfare. In this sense risk management continues to shape contemporary debates on warfare.

Invoking the risk calculus

Conceptually speaking, the economic approach to risk analysis practiced by insurance companies, consultancies, and governments differs from the sociologically inspired one adopted by “global risk management” scholars (Petersen, 2012, p. 697). The economic approach developed formal statistical methods and cost–benefit analyses to set insurance premiums based on similar past events; risk was seen by economists as “measurable uncertainty” compared to uncertainty of events with no statistical history (Petersen, 2012, p. 697). If risk is based on a linear relationship between past and future, it can be classified and to some extent quantified for better rational management. Risk in economic analysis had positive connotations such as the possibility of profit or utility gains.

However, in the sociologically inspired works derived from Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, a belief in the ability to control risks has given way to uncontrollable incalculable risks that undermined established institutions and mechanisms. Rather than utility or profit, the emphasis turns negatively towards managing risks to avert worst-case scenarios. Security risks became understood as self-generated, intentional or unintentional results of decisions in a “world where there is no one to give authoritative answers” (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 386). This sociologically inspired risk analysis is dependent on social-constructivist interpretations and political selection of risk, rather than scientific or objective quantification (Petersen, 2012, p. 704).

A critical aspect of the war and risk management perspective is what Rasmussen (2006, p. 3) termed “risk-thinking.” This means assessing present options in terms of the future. What matters is not so much what happens, but what may happen (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 4). The “risk age puts a premium on anticipating events” (Coker, 2009, p. 2). Anticipatory military intervention was declared necessary after 9/11 by the Bush Administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy. Risk-thinking influenced the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic preached taking proactive measures against an emerging risk and that “the risks of inaction outweigh the risks of action.” President Bush, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and British Prime Minister Tony Blair all employed the same sentence structure and argument (as cited in Heng, 2006, pp. 125–126). Blair reflected afterward that “after 9/11 the calculus of risks changed” (as cited in Report of the Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 332). Such language became a hallmark of the risk age

(Coker, 2009, p. ix). If each war had its own mentality, language, and distinctive grammar, it was Donald Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns" speech and exhortation to "defend against the unknown, uncertain, unseen and the unexpected" (as cited in Coker, 2009, p. ix).

President Obama allegedly preached the mantra of "don't do stupid shit" and opposed the Iraq invasion because Saddam Hussein posed no imminent direct threat. One could expect an altogether different approach to the anticipatory risk calculus favored by his predecessor. Yet when Obama pondered military force against Libya, Syria and Islamic State, these decisions continued to be framed within the risk calculus of action versus inaction. The difference, as Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes noted, was that Obama tended instead towards inaction, "It's hard for people to sometimes visualize the counterfactual, but there are decisions a president makes every week about whether to escalate. It's a choice not to escalate" (as cited in Parsons & Henningan, 2017). For Goldberg (2016), "Obama has bet that the price of direct U.S. action in Syria would be higher than the price of inaction." The Economist (2015) noted the "risks of American action ... but the greater risk is standing aside" with higher "costs of inaction." Senators McCain, Liberman, and Graham (2012) too warned about the "risks of inaction in Syria" and that "whatever the risks of our doing so, they are far outweighed by the risks of continuing to sit on our hands." While Obama tended toward inaction, the debate on military force continued to be framed within the risk calculus. These campaigns remain risk management exercises, not confronting direct imminent survival threats.

In his first use of military force, President Trump who urged non-intervention previously, apparently reversed his risk calculus (and Obama's) when the Assad regime again used chemical weapons in 2017. Explaining the launch of cruise missile strikes in response, then-National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster invoked the risk calculus again but this time opting for action: "we weighed, of course, the risk associated with any military action, we weighed that against—against the risk of inaction ... which is the risk of this continued, egregious, inhumane attacks on innocent civilians with chemical weapons" (as cited in State Department, 2017). McMaster also stressed that cruise missiles specifically avoided a facility thought to contain sarin gas, to minimize risks to civilians nearby.

While Obama deferred military responses to Assad's earlier use of chemical weapons in 2013, he did not disavow military force. He ramped up drone strikes and special operations forces raids, notably killing Osama bin Laden in 2011. When it came to Libya however, he calculated that it was "not so at the core of U.S. interests" (as cited in Goldberg, 2016). The Libya intervention thus became an exercise in risk management in Obama's calculus. Announcing US logistical and intelligence support for NATO action led by France and Britain, Obama emphasized averting what-if risks of conflict

spreading, similar to the Clinton Administration's justifications for the 1999 Kosovo campaign. Obama claimed that "left unaddressed, the growing instability in Libya could ignite wider instability in the Middle East, with dangerous consequences for the national security interests of the United States" (White House, 2011a).

The risk calculus featured heavily in Obama's explanation for military action: "given the costs and risks of intervention we must always measure our interests against the need for action ... failure to act in Libya would have carried a far greater price for America" (White House, 2011b). When launching military operations against the Islamic State, Obama again presented a series of what-if scenarios. US intelligence had "not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland," but Islamic State leaders "have threatened America and our allies," and could implement those threats "if left unchecked" (White House 2014b). Choosing inaction or action brings about costs and consequences. These will be evaluated in the Conclusion.

Risk aversion and transfer

Another characteristic of risk management campaigns are conceptual difficulties that differentiate them from classical inter-state wars. Both the US and British defense secretaries defined the 1999 Kosovo campaign as somehow less than a "war" (Heng, 2006, p. 64). The Obama Administration likewise argued that US drone and cruise missile strikes in Libya were somehow distinct from the kind of hostilities envisaged by the War Powers Act because no US ground forces were deployed. No sustained fighting or active exchanges of fire with enemy forces was expected with no prospect of significant casualties or escalation. For Shaw (2005), minimizing risks to Western soldiers through airpower and technologies to wage war from a distance is central to reducing political and electoral risks to democratically elected governments. Consequently, risk is transferred or distributed instead to the conflict zone. While the Bush administration and its allies suffered thousands of casualties in ground campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, casualty tolerance is not a blanket aversion. It varies according to the interests involved, whether politicians can make a strong case for intervention as well as the kind of military intervention considered (Carruthers, 2014). The Obama administration emphasized withdrawal from Iraq more than Bush. Meanwhile, the deaths of four US special operations trainers in Niger in 2017 prompted retired Army Maj. Gen. Robert Scales, advisor to the Pentagon Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation review, to warn that casualties can have strategic implications because "we're very, very sensitive to casualties" (as cited in Schogol, 2018). When Obama eventually initiated military action against Islamic State, he distanced his approach from Bush: "I want the American people to understand how this effort will be different from the wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan. It will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil” (White House, 2014b). Likewise, when launching air strikes against Libya in 2011, Obama stressed that he decided to intervene partly because the United States had the ability to stop Gaddafi’s forces “without putting American troops on the ground” (White House, 2011b). Obama’s reliance on air strikes and cooperation with “proxy” forces such as the Syrian Kurds and Iraqi military is reminiscent of the Afghan and Kosovo model of the late 1990s. Concepts of “proxy warfare” are thus related with risk aversion and lower public appetite for large-scale interventions and casualties (Mumford, 2013, p. 45).

Described as “extreme forms of danger-proofing” in Waldman’s “vicarious warfare” (2018, p. 194), drone warfare exemplifies the continuing emphasis on minimizing risks. Drones offer a low-risk way of allowing the United States to target dangerous and remote areas (Byman, 2013). Historically, all weapons have been to varying degrees, “risk management devices” to put enemy warriors at risk, while simultaneously reducing the risk faced by users and increasing their survival chances (Schulze, 2016, p. 40). Drones offer unprecedented technological opportunities for controlling the apportionment of risk. The pilot may be thousands of miles away safely in an underground bunker in Nevada, firing missiles at Yemeni targets. For this reason, Schulze (2016) argued that “drones appear to be a win-win from a risk management perspective”: they not only improve survival chances for friendly forces, but also increase surveillance to predict more accurately when “which risks will become real” and then provides capabilities for attack from long distance against such risks when necessary (p. 40).

However, the intensification of drone warfare in recent years also reflects Shaw’s notion of risk-transfer war. The risks increase for civilians caught up in drone strikes. As Rasmussen (2006, p. 43) argued, such remote controlled air strikes make war seem risk-free when it is not. This tragic aspect of war and risk management persists today. Obama admitted that “U.S. strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in every war” and presented a classic risk calculus:

I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties—not just in our cities at home and our facilities abroad ... doing nothing is not an option. (The White House, 2013)

What is presented as a relatively risk-free use of military force for the country deploying drone strikes is paradoxically making it harder to explain the real horrors of war (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 43). This aspect of risk management may seem attractive to policymakers with its low-cost, risk-minimizing aspect but could also have harmful negative strategic effects discussed in the conclusion.

The risk logic: managing insecurity and reshaping environments

The US presence in Afghanistan marked its 6000th day in March 2018, which a BBC program described as “Fighting the Forever War.” Former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld once argued that operations there were somehow different because “it’s not combat, as such.” Part of the reason for these conceptual difficulties is that classical inter-state wars tended to have temporal endpoints or at least, armistices signed between parties to cease hostilities (Heng, 2002). In campaigns against terrorism, Western strategy has been predicated on a “managerial logic” rather than creating enduring security (Heng, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006, p. 95). Ideas drawn from crime prevention were relied upon to understand this managerial logic of war and risk management (Heng, 2006; McCulloch & Wilson, 2016; Rasmussen, 2006).

Just as the criminological agenda had shifted away from rehabilitation towards preventing crime in the first place, there are similarities with war as a risk management exercise to avert risks materializing. John Kerry once likened terrorism to crime; both cannot be completely eliminated but only reduced to more tolerable levels. Just as Kerry presented a managerial framework in 2004 to curtail the risks of terrorism, Obama too initially advocated a managerial approach to combating Islamic State: “we can continue to shrink the Islamic State’s sphere of influence, its effectiveness, its financing, its military capabilities to the point where it is a manageable problem” (White House, 2014a). This managerial ethos continues to shape military operations against Islamic State. In 2016, Obama noted that “groups like the Islamic State can’t destroy us They’re not an existential threat to us” (as cited in Benen, 2016). The campaign against Islamic State then was not about crushing existential survival threats; it can plausibly be understood as a risk management operation.

Just as the Taliban lost its capital Kabul in 2001, the risks posed by Islamic State remain despite the recapture of Raqqa. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi warned that extremists might “erupt again somewhere else.” Obama too acknowledged that “in some form this violent extremism will be with us for years to come” (as cited in Parsons & Hennigan, 2017). Wars in the risk age do not always end with the fighting, they have become an instrument of risk management, not for providing order (Coker, 2009, p. 10). Undersecretary for Defense Douglas Feith proposed to then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that “nation-building is not our key strategic goal” (as cited in Hybel, 2014, p. 128). Ensuring Afghanistan no longer provided a safe haven for terrorist groups was. Obama’s Defense Secretary Ashton Carter reiterated that US goals were “to make sure 9/11 never emerges again from Afghanistan and to have a stable counter-terrorism platform there” (as cited in The Economist, 2016). If crime prevention emphasized shaping the operational

environment of potential criminals to minimize risks of crime occurring (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 108), likewise the campaign in Afghanistan sought to reshape the environment of terrorist networks operating there. The strategic aim first mooted by Colin Powell in 2001 was to “reduce the likelihood of terrorist incidents” by pursuing terrorists overseas and ‘make it far more difficult for such organizations to exist’ (as cited in BBC, 2001). This rationale remains unchanged 17 years later. Commanding US General John Nicholson told the BBC (2018) that “if we don’t keep pressure (on terrorist networks in Afghanistan), the risk is we will suffer more attacks on our homeland.”

Acceleration of drone warfare under President Obama can also be interpreted as reshaping terrorists’ operational environments. The slaying of Al-Qaeda leader Anwar Al-Awlaki by drones in Yemen exemplified what Kessler and Werner (2008) call “extrajudicial killing as a form of risk management.” The Obama presidency launched ten times more drone strikes than Bush (Purkis & Serle, 2017), arguing that dozens of terrorists have been removed from the battlefield and plots disrupted. Intelligence seized from Bin Laden’s hideout in Pakistan indicated that the Al-Qaeda leader fretted about difficulties of replacing experienced leaders killed by drones. A sustained pace of attacks keeps terrorists on the run, having to constantly worry about safety, security, and quality replacements rather than focus on planning, training, and operationalizing their plots (Byman, 2013). Cumulatively over time, drone warfare essentially seeks to reduce the risks of future attacks by physically eliminating terrorists and pressuring their support infrastructure.

A managerial ethos to war is predicated on a minimalist utilitarian calculus to avoid harm that is in turn defined as an indicator of achievement. Colin Powell first suggested in 2001, “We can make a judgement that the war is being won or has been won when we don’t see that kind of terrorist incident occurring anywhere” (as cited in BBC, 2001). President Trump’s Afghan speech also manifested this ethos:

nearly 16 years after the September 11th attacks ... the American people are weary of war without victory ... trying to rebuild countries in our own image, instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations ... We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists. (The White House, 2017)

Trump has swung the pendulum back towards minimalist risk management goals first espoused in the Bush administration: to disrupt terror networks in Afghanistan. Cyclical open-ended approaches remain necessary since risks cannot be completely eliminated and require constant management. Obama correctly stated that in risk management campaigns, “We will not achieve the kind of clearly defined victory comparable to those that we won in previous wars against nations” (The White House, 2016). US General Nicholson

defined “winning” in Afghanistan as reconciliation between parties that brings stability, allowing military pressure to be continually applied on terrorist groups and managing the risks of terrorist attacks emanating from there (BBC, 2018).

Conclusion

Risk management campaigns premised on decisions for either action or inaction can have serious consequences. It is worth remembering that “taking action based only on worst-case thinking can introduce unforeseen dangers and costs ... a better approach to managing risk involves assessment of the full portfolio of risks—those reduced by the proposed intervention as well as those increased” (Stern & Wiener, 2006, p. 396). In terms of strategy, leaders might have the impression of doing something through “kinetic” use of airpower but in fact have little leverage on the ground to shape outcomes (Waldman, 2018, p. 199). Pollack (2014) argued that airpower can empower weak indigenous ground proxies (against the Taliban and Gaddafi’s regime) but as President Obama has also noted, military intervention without a major effort to rebuild afterward would generate new risks to American interests (Friedman, 2014). There are opportunity costs of the risk management approach. The US/UK war in Iraq alienated NATO allies Germany and France, while intervention in Kosovo soured diplomatic relations with China and Russia. The United States also faced being tied down by irregular militias in Iraq. This “shackling of US military capacity” in risk management campaigns may lead to “distraction from greater threats” (Stern & Wiener, 2006, p. 433) including Russia and China. On the other hand, initial US and UK inaction on Syria arguably left a vacuum for other powers such as Iran and Russia.

The risks borne by civilians may foster hatred of foreign military intervention in a counter-productive manner leading potentially to the “accidental guerilla” syndrome (Kilcullen, 2011). Rather than reducing terrorism, the invasion of Iraq arguably promoted it (Johnson, 2014). After the Manchester terror attacks in 2017, opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn suggested that UK military interventions actually increased the risk of terror attacks in Britain. However, not taking significant military action also does not guarantee safety. Terror attacks in Germany and Belgium are a case in point. As for the impact on norms and values, abuse and torture scandals tainted the US message of democracy.

Drone warfare has further opened a legal and normative gap between the United States and the wider human rights community over a broader understanding of the right to life norm and just war principles as interpreted by the US defense of drone use (Brunstetter & Jimenez-Bacardi, 2015). The war against Iraq also raised controversy about legality and norms surrounding

preemptive and preventive war. Inaction over Syria further posed questions about ethics and human rights, particularly with regard to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. When the Trump Administration launched cruise missile strikes in 2018 with Britain and France, the justification was instead based on upholding the norm of non-use of chemical weapons.

Strategy driven by what-if scenarios which later proved unfounded (in Iraq) can impact negatively on domestic social dynamics. Normative questions of democracy and authority arise when politicians choose military action against what they select as pressing risks (Petersen, 2012, p. 705). Trust and credibility of governments may be undermined in case of false positives. Sapping public appetite for further interventions could lead to “under-reaction next time” (Stern & Wiener, 2006, p. 433). The Cameron government lost a parliamentary vote on using force against the Assad government in 2013, despite the PM warning that “this is not Iraq. We must not let the spectre of previous mistakes paralyze us” (as cited in Grice, 2013).

PM Theresa May’s subsequent attack on Syria in 2018 without parliamentary approval is in some ways a reaction to Cameron’s past failure. For Defense Secretary Hammond, the Iraq war “poisoned the well of public opinion” (as cited in Grice, 2013). A Gallup poll in 2013 found the lowest support for intervention in Syria among the US public in twenty years. A gap persists between mainstream elite support for British involvement in Afghanistan and a skeptical public (Reifler et al., 2014). However, public opinion is neither static nor a blanket opposition. Rather, it is driven by questions over motive, legitimacy, and targets selected (Reifler et al., 2014). In drawn-out risk management campaigns in Afghanistan, domestic support usually ebbs over time as costs of involvement grow compared to initial concerns over risks of inaction.

Public skepticism is understandable because “the whole concept of war has changed under Obama” (Parsons & Hennigan, 2017), as the United States became embroiled in different conflicts at a lower level with no foreseeable end in sight. The Obama way of war may have distinct features but several important continuities remain from the Bush and Clinton-era wars of risk management. Obama’s campaigns against Islamic State and Libya were in fact premised on the need to avoid risks of inaction. While Trump loosened constraints on commanders and deployed Marines to provide artillery fire for Syrian rebels, the cruise missiles launched against the Assad regime were likewise couched by General McMaster in the familiar risk calculus. The risk-transfer model of relying on airpower to manage risks from the Clinton era was intensified by the Obama administration through aerial interventions against Libya, Islamic State and the drone campaign.

It is premature to speculate on Trump’s approach but the use of force thus far has involved a reliance on air power to minimize risks to US personnel. Lastly, an open-ended ethos still characterizes military campaigns,

reminiscent of a risk management perspective. Announcing airstrikes against Islamic State in Libya five years after toppling Gaddafi, Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook stated that “there was no end point at this time” (Department of Defense, 2016). Trump’s refusal to set timelines in Afghanistan and his refocusing towards conditions-based disrupting of terror networks rather than nation-building, suggests that the managerial ethos behind risk management campaigns is here to stay.

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Notes on contributor

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